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ABSTRACT

Research has suggested that parenting practices have an influence on children's subsequent adjustment. It was hypothesized that maternal employment would be associated with both maternal and paternal parenting style, and that family SES would mediate these effects. A sample of 94 families (from the Philadelphia region) with children under the age of 5 years was assessed. Families were divided into three groups on the basis of maternal employment (full-time, part-time, and no outside employment). A median-split was performed to divide the sample of families into high and low SES subgroups. No significant correlation between SES and parenting style was found. Few differences between families with unemployed, part-time employed, and full-time employed mothers were found. However, on the summary parenting styles measure, families of part-time employed mothers were found to be significantly more reliant on verbal forms of discipline and more apt to ignore preschoolers' misbehavior than were families of full-time employed mothers. Mothers and fathers from families of full-time employed mothers were significantly more likely to share parenting responsibilities but not more likely to share household responsibilities. Families with part-time employed mothers were notably more likely to share dinnertime with their families than were families with either unemployed or full-time employed mothers. (Author/JBJ)

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The Relationship Between Parenting Style and Maternal Employment in Families with Preschoolers

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Abstract

It was hypothesized that maternal employment would be associated with both maternal and paternal parenting style, and that family SES would mediate these effects. A sample of 94 families with children under the age of five years was assessed. Families were divided into three groups on the basis of maternal employment (full-time, part-time, and no outside employment).

A median-split was performed to divide the sample of families into high and low SES subgroups. No significant correlation between SES and parenting style was found.

Few differences between families with unemployed, part-time employed, and full-time employed mothers were found. However, on the summary parenting style measure, families of part-time employed mothers were found to be significantly more reliant on verbal forms of discipline and more apt to ignore preschoolers' misbehavior than were families of full-time employed mothers.

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responsibilities. Families with part-time employed mothers were notably more likely to share dinnertime with their families than were families with either unemployed or full-time employed mothers.

Introduction

Research has suggested that parenting practices have an influence on children's subsequent adjustment. Parenting styles have been classified in a variety of ways. Baumrind's (1971) typology, which distinguishes authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting practices, has yielded consistent research findings delineating the types of parenting associated with successful socialization of children. Hart, et al. (1992), has indicated that parental power assertion and induction are two prominent forms of discipline that have been consistently linked to ways that children think and behave in social situations, particularly with their peers.

Given the assumed importance of parents' responses to their children, parental characteristics that mediate these responses should have a significant impact on children. Decades of research have examined differences among children from families with employed and nonemployed mothers. Significant differences in parenting styles among employed and nonemployed mothers have been assumed, yet much of the empirical work has failed to support these assumptions.

In the present study, responses of preschoolers' parents to four prototypical problem behavior scenarios were used to assess parenting style. These situations described disciplinary contexts where children (a) picked flowers from a neighbor's garden, (b) refused to go to bed at bedtime on a school night, (c) grabbed a toy away from another child while playing together and (d) pushed another child to the ground after that child had accidently run

into her/him. The parents' responses were classified into 4 categories derived by the researchers. The practices were described as 1 of the following: (a) passive neglecting or ignoring, (b) verbal reasoning with the child, (c) structured control within limits and behavioral intervention (d) abusive punishing. An example of the passive parent would be a laissez-faire parent who did nothing to help the behavior problem of the child. An example of the verbal reasoning parent would be a parent who let the child talk through their problem. An example of the structured control parent would be a parent who disciplined their child within limits without the say of the child. An example of the abusive parent would be a parent who physically hurt their child in their disciplining. In addition, a variety of demographic variables and family behaviors were assessed ranging from daily rituals, distribution of family responsibilities, and perception of spousal support. The relationships between these dependent variables and family maternal employment status was investigated.

Method

Subjects:

The subjects used in this study included ninety-four families from the Philadelphia region. The majority of the subjects surveyed were referred by the Parent Resource Center,a non profit organization, providing support and information to parents in Montgomery County,Pa. Thirteen single-parent families were excluded, yielding a sample of eighty-one two-parent families. Responses were obtained from 65 mothers and 16 fathers from these families with 82 female and 81 male children.

Procedure:

The survey used in this study was conducted by a telephone interview lasting approximately 10-15 minutes in duration. The object of the questionnaire was to measure the relationship between maternal employment and parenting styles. The survey consisted of 33-items which were developed by the researchers, pertaining to issues such as employment status, division of responsibility for child care and household chores. Parents were also asked to respond to four hypothetical disciplinary scenarios depicting preschool misbehavior. The four situations were adapted from a study conducted by Hart et al. (1992) which assessed the reliability and validity of these measures of parenting style.

In the first section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to disclose information about their age, gender, and marital status. Subjects were also asked to disclose their children's age and gender, along with each child's specific weekly bedtime and

wake-up time.

The second part of the survey pertained to parents' employment. Subjects were asked to indicate the number of hours each spouse worked and were to describe what type of work each performed, in order to allow the researchers to determine whether they held a professional, white-collar/managerial, or blue-collar/non-supervisory position. Questions regarding maternal employment for each spouse's mother were included in this section as well. Mother's employment status was considered full-time if she worked at least 37 hours and part-time if less than 37 hours. Within the sample of mothers, twenty-one mothers were employed full-time, 35 held part-time jobs, and 25 reported being unemployed. Mothers who reported either holding a full-time or part-time job, were also asked to indicate how their children were being cared for during their work hours (group care, family care, at home care, or by a relative).

In the third section of the survey, questions addressed responsibility for overall child care and the support respondents received from their spouse regarding their parenting skills. Subjects were also asked to disclose the average number of baths they or their partner give their child a week, how many times a week their family eats breakfast and dinner together, and to indicate who is responsible for the majority of emotional comforting when their child is upset.

The fourth and final part of the survey included four hypothetical scenarios describing disciplinary situations in which a child (a) picked flowers from a neighbor's flower garden, (b)

refused to go to bed at their bed time on a week night, (c) grabbed a toy away from another child while playing together, and (d) pushed another child to the ground who had accidently run into him or her. In responding to the four scenarios, parents were asked to mention all possible strategies they might use in each situation.

Results

Both maternal and paternal jobs were classified as professional, white collar/managerial, or blue collar/nonsupervisory. Family SES was determined by combining this job classification data. No significant correlation between family status and parenting style was found.

In this sample, the maternal employment status of the parents' own mothers was not significantly related to the family's lifestyle or parenting practices.

Intercorrelation among the response to the 4 disciplinary scenarios were generally not significant. The one exception was a significant relationship between response to "picks flowers" and "no bedtime" ($r=.33$, $p<.01$, $n=81$).

Results indicated that over half of those surveyed adopted a reasoning type of parenting style with reference to the issue of picking flowers. More than a quarter of those surveyed used a more structured approach. However, many parents stated they would ignore the picking and not inflict punishment for this behavior.

Close to half surveyed indicated they would use a control technique when their child refused to go to bed. A second preferred tactic (39%) was using words to appeal to the child. A few parents were lackadaisical about bedtime and an even smaller number suggested they would more seriously reprimand their child for this behavior.

Grabbing a toy from and pushing another child elicited an active response (verbal or nonverbal behavior) from almost all

parents (over 90%). No one indicated use of any serious type of punishment for grabbing, and only 3.7% would punish pushing. Half responded that they would take behavioral steps to control either of these situations.

Families were divided into 3 maternal employment status groups on the basis of mothers' weekly number of work hours (full-time equals at least 37 hours; part-time equals less than 37 hours, and unemployed). Few significant differences across the 3 maternal employment groups were observed. No significant differences were found between full-time and unemployed mothers for frequency of baths, a specific parent preferred for comfort, or the number of breakfasts the family shared together.

A summary measure of parenting style was calculated for each family by totaling responses to the 4 disciplinary scenarios. A t-test comparison revealed a significant difference between full-time and part-time mother's families (part-time $x=9.36$, $s.d.=1.54$, $n=33$ versus full-time $x=1.26$, $s.d.=1.59$, $n=19$, $p<.05$). Families with full-time employed mothers were significantly more likely to use active behavioral intervention. T-tests also showed that a significant difference existed between full-time and part-time employed mothers' families in how many times a week they ate dinner together (part-time $\bar{x}=4.97$, $s.d.=2.08$, $n=34$ versus full-time $x=3.74$, $s.d.=1.73$, $n=19$, $p<.03$).

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in sharing responsibilities of parenting across maternal employment groups. Families with full-time employed mothers were most likely to report sharing responsibilities for managing children and childrearing

(full-time x=2.56, s.d.=.83, n=25 versus part-time x=2.11, s.d.=.68, n=35 versus unemployed x=2.14, s.d.=.73, n=21). A similar difference was not found for sharing of housework. A trend in the data supported that unemployed mothers felt more supported in their parenting than full-time employed mothers (unemployed x=9.40, s.d.=0.82, n=25 versus full-time x=8.62, s.d.=1.88, n=21, p<.09).

Discussion

Generally, the results of this study suggest that employed mothers' parenting styles do not widely deviate from the parenting styles of their unemployed peers. Few significant differences emerged when parenting practices of households with full-time employed, part-time employed, and unemployed mothers were compared. The only significant parenting difference was found between full-time and part-time employed mother families on the summary parenting measure, indicating greater use of active behavioral interventions in families with mothers who worked full-time. These families may favor more active measures than families with part-time employed mothers because their hectic schedules may preclude lengthy verbal discussions.

For this sample of mothers, being employed was not associated with a significant reduction in household responsibilities, although it was significantly related to paternal involvement in childrearing. Husbands of unemployed mothers were perceived as being more supportive of their wives' parenting.

This study's findings suggest that mothers who contribute to their household income may not feel as supported in their parenting by their spouses as those who do not hold jobs outside the home. There may be several reasons for this apparent difference. Employed mothers' efforts in juggling the dual responsibilities of job and family may increase their need for such spousal support. It is possible that employed mothers' vulnerability to guilt and/or fatigue may increase their need for validation of their mothering. This need increases their risk of frustration with the level of

spousal support that is actually forthcoming, even when it is reasonable. Employed mothers may bring greater expectations of reassurance and praise to their relationships with their husbands. This could increase the probability of their being disappointed and perceiving a lack of support. Alternatively, this perceived lower support may be due to greater spousal conflict when parenting is more evenly shared, which actually may reduce husbands' support. It is also possible that the additional burdens of dual careers diminishes the time available for spouse's emotional support of one another.

The failure to observe high intercorrelations among the responses to the four disciplinary scenarios indicates they failed to tap a unitary parenting style variable. This may reflect a measurement problem or actual low cross-situational consistency in parenting practices. The notion that cross-situational consistency in parenting is low seems reasonable given the differential pull of various behavioral situations and the operation of idiosyncratic parental values. Some disciplinary situations may contain highly salient features that limit the range of parental freedom. For example, here the aggressive situations involving grabbing and pushing elicited a far more homogeneous response from parents than the other situations. In contrast, the greatest variability was observed in responses to bedtime problems, probably reflecting the wide range of parental attitudes about the value of adhering to a strict bedtime. Future research might explore the types of discretionary disciplinary situations most likely to reveal consistencies in parental disciplinary style, perhaps allowing for

the error variance associated with idiosyncratic value judgments by measuring more situations than were sampled in the present investigation.

The failure to obtain significant SES effects could have been due to this study's relatively homogeneous sample and the limited range of SES therefore investigated. Replication with a more widely representative sample might allow this possibility to be assessed.

The lack of relationship observed between lifestyle variables and parents' own mothers' maternal status was possibly due to the infrequency of grandmothers' employment. In this sample, extremely few parents' own mothers had been employed when they were young.

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